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Culture, Oral Narratives and “Monomyth”: Projection of the Archetypal Hero in Easterine  
Kire’s *When the River Sleeps*

Abstract: Oral narratives play a crucial role in every indigenous culture to maintain its customs, rituals, beliefs, traditions, way of living and way of being. By textualizing “orality” (Ong 1) in their writings, the writers from indigenous community attempt to retrieve oral narratives and discuss the manner in which oral narratives shape the psyche and life of people of indigenous cultures. In a culture, cultural mythology by means of “orality” constructs its archetypal hero who bears the value, morality and indigenous knowledge of his culture. Easterine Kire, the first Naga Writer of Northeast India, in her novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) shows how the story of the heart-stone initiates the hero’s journey or “monomyth” (Campbell 4). She divulges the Angami culture of Nagaland by revealing a “world where the boundaries between magic and reality fall away, makes friend and agree to live as one” (Balantrapu). Kire shows how the

myth of the sleeping river appears in Vilie's collective unconsciousness and turns into "personalized myth" (Campbell 34) as the stone appears in his dream and triggers a "call to adventure" (Campbell 34). The paper also projects how the hero and the hero's journey or "monomyth" are used by Kire as archetypes.

Keywords - Angami culture, Archetypal Hero, Hero's journey, Indigenous knowledge,

Orality

A narrative is a story that is addressed to someone in written or verbal form. Narrative plays its role as an organizing principle of human life because "humans are story-telling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied life" (Connelli and Clandinin 2). Thus oral narratives (myths, folktales, fables, legends and stories) become an integral part of the culture of indigenous people to maintain its custom, ritual, belief, ideal, tradition, way of living and way of being. By the term indigenous, Anaya denotes the "living descendants of preinvasion inhabitants of lands now dominated by others" and also says that "they are indigenous because their ancestral roots are embedded in the lands in which they live, or would like to live, much more deeply than the roots of more powerful sectors of society living on the same lands or in close proximity" (3).

In their culture "orality" (Ong 1) as a bearer and preserver of oral traditions gives verbal expressions to oral narratives and gives birth to indigenous literature. Orality has a shaping influence not only on the indigenous culture but also the dominant culture to preserve their narratives. There are two types of "orality" – "primary orality" and "secondary orality". "Primary orality" is untouched by the knowledge of writing and print culture and in this case, all the cultural aspects should be preserved through memorizing and storytelling. And the other kind is "secondary orality" which is "essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality based permanently on the use of writing and print" (Ong 136). "Orality" gives

liveliness to the communication among the indigenous people and restores their “daily speech, a teaching folklore, ceremony and religion, a heritage passed by generation to generation in songs, legends, jokes, morality plays, healing rituals, event-histories, social protocols, spiritual rites of passage, and vision journeys to the sacred worlds” (Lincoln 3). Thus it preserves their culture as culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1).

Indigenous people gather their knowledge through careful observation of their physical world. They learn and get experience from the forest ecology around them as well as the world of spirit. Indigenous knowledge is based on “the immediate world of personal and tribal experiences...and...spiritual world evidenced through dreams, visions and signs” ((Battiste 2). This accumulated knowledge is passed down from one generation to the subsequent generation by means of oral narratives. Oral narratives have their appeal even in today’s society because oral narratives make a bridge between past and present to balance between old customs and new ideas. The advent of modernization appears as a challenge to the indigenous people to maintain the elements of “orality”. “Orality” starts to get lost by the touch of literacy. But the writers from indigenous community attempt to retrieve their cultures and narratives by means of “secondary orality” which they use in their writings:

Oral tradition and storytelling represent a crucial part of the all indigenous cultures to an extent that many contemporary writers of indigenous origin after years of silence have been striving to incorporate many key elements of the oral traditional storytelling into their writings not only to preserve them but also to make them understandable for contemporary generation of native and also non-native readers.  
(Ščigulinská 116)

Thus “orality” like other forms of textuality becomes an important tool to represent the indigenous knowledge, “With the rise of Indigenous textual studies, orality is becoming understood as one form of textuality that exists in relation to others – visual, material, gestural, kinesthetic, digital – in increasingly wide networks of Indigenous knowledge” (Teuton 172).

There are many indigenous communities in Northeast India, such as Adi, Angami, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Adi, Nyishi, Angami, Bhutia, Kuki, Rengma, Bodo etc. and they have their own cultures. As they are indigenous, their lives and cultures are marked by orality, the reservoir of oral traditions. The Northeast Indian writers feel the importance of orality in their lives and use it as a key factor in their writings. It is stated, “Orality, oral traditions, and oral literatures carry great meaning within Indigenous communities even as their usage narrows the scope of our understanding of Indigenous knowledge, communication, and expressive culture” (Teuton 169). The most acclaimed novelists such as Mamang Dai, Dhruba Hazarika, Temsula Aao, Siddhartha Deb, Mitra Phukan show in their novels how “orality” becomes the main tool to represent the cultures of the indigenous communities. One such celebrated writer, the most recent voice of Nagaland is Easterine Kire who expresses her ideas and cultural ethos through her writings. Her most popular novels such as *The Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), *When the River Sleeps* (2014) etc. and other short stories take into account the lived experience of the people of Nagaland. In her writings, Kire performs her duty as one of the best storytellers of her region. She is the first Naga writer in English who textualizes “orality” in her writings to represent the cultural life of Angami community as well as attempts to resurrect oral narratives. In an interview Kire stated, “We felt we needed to create written Naga Literature. We have so much oral narratives but with oral dying out, it’s all going to be lost.”

Kire won the Hindu prize 2015 for her novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) in which she textualizes “orality” to present how oral narratives shape the psyche and life of the Angami community. The people of Angami territory formulate their characters and live in accordance with the ideals and activities of their ancestors which come to them by means of oral narratives. At the same time, she sheds light on the fact how the hero archetype is born in the culture of Angami community by means of story. In the indigenous community, narratives carry the symbols and archetypes to plant them in their collective unconsciousness. Jung writes:

And the essential thing, psychologically, is that in dreams, fantasies, and other exceptional states of mind the most far-fetched mythological motifs and symbols can appear autochthonously at any time, often, apparently, as the result of particular influences, traditions, and excitations working on the individual, but more often without any sign of them. These “primordial images” or “archetypes,” as I have called them, belong to the basic stock of the unconscious psyche and cannot be explained as personal acquisitions. Together they make up that psychic stratum which has been called the collective unconscious. (3068)

Here she shows how in a culture, oral narratives (story of the sleeping river), personalized myth (hero’s dream) and depersonalized dream are correlated with each other to divulge the culture through the hero’s journey or “monomyth”. Every culture produces its hero to guide its morality and value system. It is the hero who embedded in himself the values and morality from the traditional lessons guided by the culture. Thus the hero is the manifestation and bearer of the value systems of his culture,

While the cultures of societies vary, there is a common strand embedded within the infrastructure of each civilization: the hero and his story. Societies throughout history and from all over the globe have lifted up exemplary individuals from folklore and

legend as the embodiments of the qualities valued by their cultures. Heroes vary with the qualities of their cultures. Likewise, every hero undergoes a quest from which he achieves a place in the literary pantheon of his homeland. While there is no outline used to definitively chronicle the journey from mere citizen to iconic being, the fact remains that the hero is the personification of his culture's morality and value system. (Harris 2)

Like other cultures, the indigenous Naga culture also produces its heroes. Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* is the adventurous story of the lone hunter Vilie, who can be considered as the hero of Angami community. The objective of this paper is to show how the oral narratives initiate the hero's journey or "monomyth" to divulge the Angami culture of Nagaland. This paper also sheds light on the fact that how Kire in her narrative, projects the concept of archetypal hero through the journey and character of Vilie.

Campbell says that there is an underlying pattern in the journey of every hero. He writes that the "adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (Campbell 28). In the novel, the superhuman journey for which Vilie is fated, is steadily developed by Kire throughout first few chapters where she actively describes Vilie's dream, his past life in the village and present situation in the forest – "the forest was home to Vilie. He had spent twenty-five of his forty-eight years here" (Kire 3). The journey starts twenty-five years ago when he left his home because of the ominous death of his beloved. In the forest he prepares himself for his heroic journey. He has no intention of returning to the village as the forest becomes his only abode: "The forest is my wife, and perhaps this is what marriage is like" (Kire 9). He makes himself adept in dealing with every affair of the forest ecology, supernatural world and hunting. Like a mythical hero, Vilie has grown up under the influences of their ancestral supernatural force, Ukepenuopfü, the birth-spirit and the supreme



God. He has knowledge of the cultural life of his community which is determined by the oral narratives. In their community there is a myth about the sleeping river that if one can wrench a stone from the heart of the sleeping river, it will give him some untold power by means of which he can make his life prosperous and enliven himself to the stature of a spiritual being. This myth makes a part in Vilie's collective unconsciousness and becomes his "personalized myth" when it appears in his dream. The myth gets rooted too deep in his unconsciousness that in his dream

Vilie plunged his hand into the river...he slid forward and entered the water and plucked a smooth stone from the bottom of the river... the river come alive! Vilie's struggles were feeble against the force of the rushing water...in a final panicked outburst, he struck out against the power that was consuming him" (Kire 1-2).

Dream is used in this novel as personalized myth as Joseph Campbell writes: "Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream. Both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamic of the psyche" (Campbell 18). Here, Kire shows how the story of the stone evokes Vilie and becomes his private myth. At the same time the "personalized myth" becomes depersonalized when Vilie tells the story to Roko and other hunters. Vilie's personal aim to get the heart stone is the depersonalized dream of every hunter as "every hunter wants to find it" (Kire 3). In his journey, dreams act as a trigger to "the call to adventure" (Campbell 34); the dream of the heart-stone created a sense of "despairing emptiness" in him "for the past two years, ever since he had first heard the story of the sleeping river" (Kire 2). Fry discusses Jung's idea how dream as a part of collective unconsciousness contributes to the hero's quest: "The quest-romance has analogies to both rituals and dream, ...into dream terms the quest romance the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality" (Fry 193). He cannot refuse the call because the desire to



explore the mystic and supernatural haunted him since the time of his beloved's death.

Another reason to respond to the call to adventure is "he felt sure he was destined to get the stone from the river water, and that was why he went on a journey" (Kire 238). Through his acceptance of the journey, Vilie performs his duty as an ideal hero of his community. Thus Vilie's decision to take the journey exemplifies the first stage of "monomyth":

This first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the "call to adventure"—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight. (Campbell 53)

The first stage of "monomyth" is remarkably applicable to Vilie's journey. He committed himself to take the journey when he responds to his dream (the call to the adventure). As soon as he takes the decision to be prepared for the adventure, he separates himself from the ordinary world (his forest) and sets out for the journey. Thus he makes himself ready to traverse "the first Threshold" (Campbell 34). He is on the way to explore both the physical and psycho-spiritual new worlds where he can understand his self and soul. Vilie confronts many adversities and crisis conjured by spirits and human beings. But he has the knowledge to overcome the adversities. In this "monomyth" the seer infuses knowledge in Vilie about the supernatural world. Vilie knows that in a supernatural journey one needs more spiritual knowledge than physical strength. He always keeps in mind the advice of the seer:

"Sometimes the struggle is not against the flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder" (Kire 31). When he confronts the

weretiger, he curbs down its anger by his indigenous knowledge. He knows the myth of weretiger that man and tigers are brothers. This myth portrays the cultural folk practice of certain men who transformed their spirits into tigers. He also struggles against “the dark heart of man” (Kire 64). But there are helpers to make him conscious of upcoming problems. The spirits in the unclean forest, Rarhuria causes physical and spiritual weaknesses in him. He gets fever and is attacked by spirits. A dark spirit was sitting on him and his all effort was in vain. Here, Vilie “instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died” (Campbell 83). In this tainted and spirit-ridden condition he again applies his indigenous knowledge given by the seer: “Let your spirit bigger one. They are spirits, they will submit to the authority of the spirit that assert itself” (Kire 83). The knowledge helps him gather courage and “with a superhuman effort, Vilie summoned all his strength and pushed the thing off him” (Kire 83). This makes him realize the power of his self and soul by which he defies the spirit: “Mine is the greater spirit! I will never submit to you” (Kire 83)! The hero confronts the dangers not only with physical weapons but also with psychological weapons like persistence, compassion and determination. As Vilie “undertakes for himself the perilous journey...into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in the landscape of symbolic figures” (Campbel 92). The encounters with the symbolic figures – weretiger, dark heart of man and spirits are necessary for Vilie so that he can purify his self and become “more concentrated on transcendental things” (Campbell 93).

After crossing the threshold, the hero enters the second phase of his journey – “initiation”. This is the most important phase of adventure where the hero goes through the road of trials and ordeals and survives them. In this phase the hero

is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers

for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage (Campbell 89).

In Vilie's case, the road of trials starts when he enters the territory of sleeping river with Kani who accompanies him in the journey. Now he has to prove the validity of his determination, persistence and wisdom which he acquired throughout his life. The exact time to pluck the stone has come to them. Vilie makes himself ready fully because "half ready is not enough" (Kire 99). With full preparation he plunged into the river and pulled the stone out of it. The river like a spirit gets alive as its torrents drags him down into its depth. Instead of concentrating on his physical struggle he emphasizes on his inward power, the spirit words: "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone" (Kire 103)! Thus because of his purified heart and spiritual knowledge he got the heart stone, "the elixir". In accordance with Campbell's theory of "monomyth" the final test of the hero's talent is "meeting with the goddess (who is incarnate in every woman)" (Campbell 34). In Vilie's case the goddess mother appears in the form female figures – Kani and Ate. Kani explores to him the mystic and supernatural power of the stone while Ate helps Vilie to protect his life and the stone from her sister. Zote, sister of Ate wants the heart stone to avenge on her enemies – the villagers who drove them out of the village because of being Kirhupfūmia, women who have evil power on their finger. The other spirits also want the stone "because it has the power to turn the hearts of the others to the owner" (Kire 111). But, Vilie has the larger heart to bear and protect the stone. The importance of the heart-stone is realized by him through his indigenous knowledge. In the novel, Kire focuses on Vilie's wisdom because most of the people want the stone for their personal interest whereas Vilie needs it for his spiritual elevation: "But most of all, he wanted the spiritual knowledge that the sleeping river would give him if they found it" (Kire 96).

In the ultimate phase of his journey, the hero with the elixir comes to his ordinary world to help the mankind of his world:

If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. (Campbell 182)

In this phase his character and wisdom are again verified to test how the hero deals with good and evil and how he uses the elixir for the greater interest of mankind. When Vile meets the Kirhupfümia sisters, he purifies the heart of Ate by the touch of the heart-stone and breaks down the false notion that she has evil power on the top of her finger: “You must not continue to believe in a lie... It is a lie that you cannot escape your evil nature... You are what you believe you are and what’s more... Does the heart-stone give you the power to understand that” (Kire 138)? He has love for mankind. The heart-stone illuminates Vile with a magnificent spiritual knowledge. That’s why he is unable to shoot Zote in the leg when she grabbed the stone from him. He always investigates the little flare of goodness and try to resurrect it: “No one is completely bad and even if they do bad things, there is still some vestige of goodness in them which can be brought out” (Kire 171). By the touch of the heart-stone he gives life to Ate when she falls on the lap of death by the attack of the spirit-tiger and other spirits. The exact time to use the acquired supernatural power comes for Vilie. He realized that it is impossible to bring her back humanly. He retrieves the heart-stone from his bag and squeezes it to direct his fury at the spirit-tiger who killed Ate. “Vilie summoned all his knowledge of the supernatural in a last effort to battle her back to life” (Kire 193).

Viie’s confrontation with such esoteric world shows that the “spiritual world of Nagaland comprises of both good and evil spirits and only a man of complete integrity can quell the evil” (Sekhar et al 4). Thus through his complete integrity and wisdom he summons

his ancestral spirit, Ukepenuopfü to get Ate's life back from the clutch of evil spirits. With Ate Vilie now goes to his ancestral village, the Angami community and hands the heart-stone over Ate so that by means of it she can make the community prosper. He has learnt the meaning and importance of the stone through his indigenous knowledge: "The heart-stone is in my heart. I have its knowledge curved into my heart, and no one can steal it from here" (Kire 223).

Though he returns in his community, he wishes to live in the forest as the forest gave him all the opportunities to explore the mystic "world where the boundaries between magic and reality fall away, make friends and agree to live as one" (Balantrapu). The most crucial moment for the hero comes when Vilie saves the heart-stone from the unknown man by the cost of his life. The man intended to trade with the heart-stone. But Vilie knows it "is not for working evil. It is to be used to spread goodness" (Kire 230). Thus through the character of Vilie, Kire "unfolds Naga culture that gives prominence to the spiritual knowledge and spiritual wisdom, rather than consumerist attitude of modern era" (Sekhar et al 4).

In the novel *When the River Sleeps*, Kire through the character of Vilie, projects the archetypal hero. The archetypal hero is prevalent in every field of anthropological, psychological and literary studies. The literary exploration of such archetypal hero has been examined through the quest myth by many theorists such as Northrop Fry, Ernst Cassirer, James Frazer and Joseph Campbell. Campbell defines the archetypal hero in terms of "monomyth". Fry describes this monomyth in terms of his mythoi of romance:

The complete form romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey, and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both die; and the exaltation of the hero. (Fry 187)

Vilie shows all the characteristics of an archetypal hero in his character. He is born in a supernatural and mystic community which is based on animism. The death of his beloved makes him leave his family and his desire for the heart-stone leads him to the revelation, an expedition that unravels the Naga culture through a confrontation with the mystic and supernatural world. Like an archetypal hero he has a special weapon, the indigenous knowledge and he gets help by the seer, Kani, Subale, the old man, Ate and others in his journey. He uses the heart-stone not for his sake but for the sake of his fellow beings of his community. He sacrifices his life to protect the goodness, morality and value of his culture entwined in the heart-stone. Vilie fulfills the needs of his culture and fits himself to the true self of the hero. He proves that heroes are:

Part of the perceptual system of a culture through which unfamiliar situations, originating either within the culture or outside it, are interpreted or fitted into old symbolic molds. In helping to pattern the relationships among basic beliefs, values, and behaviors that organize social interaction, [heroes] produce common social understanding of new social conditions (Breen and Corcoran 14).

The last chapter of the novel "The Heart of the Stone" unfolds that Vilie is still alive in the unconsciousness of Ate, Roko and other characters. He and his journey become a part of their cultural mythology as Ate transmits his story orally to her sons and others. Vilie as a hero, is an ideal for Ate who hopes to make her sons hunters so that they will protect the heart-stone: "Well, the stone will need a hunter to protect it from evil men. What could be better than two protectors instead of just the one" (241). She also wishes to prepare them for the heroic journey that will help them to realize their spiritual identity. Thus the hero becomes a recurring pattern or archetype of its culture.

Throughout the novel Kire justifies her duty as an artist to represent the Naga life and culture through the hero's journey as Campbell in his book *Pathway to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation* remarks?

Artists are magical helpers. Evoking symbols and motifs that connect us to our deeper selves, they can help us along the heroic journey of our own lives. [...] The artist is meant to put the objects of this world together in such a way that through them you will experience that light, that radiance which is the light of our consciousness and which all things both hide and, when properly looked upon, reveal. The hero's journey is one of the universal patterns through which that radiance shows brightly. (6)

Through the narrative, Kire makes a connection between psyche (represented by the river) and heart (represented by the heart-stone) to project the true self and character of Vilie, representative of the goodness of the Naga people. Vilie's journey through the extramundane world along with its supernatural elements discloses their paramount human soul. The benevolent and hospitable attitude of the helpers in the course of Vilie's journey also focuses on the goodness of character of the Naga people. Through such representation Kire desires to change "the perception of Nagaland as a strife-torn hotbed of violence. She succeeds in casting an innocent but firm spotlight on the beauty that the place really exudes, with its idyllic villages, stretches of mountains and forests, and its strong connection with the occult" (Balantrapu).



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